New recruits: Wardens in the making

For aspiring Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wardens, all roads lead to Napa. That's the home of

By Louisa Hufstader

Napa Valley College and its DFG Academy, the only wildlife law enforcement training program DFG recognizes.

DFG photo by Debra Hamilton

A student learns to apply restraint techniques from an instructor wearing protective gear.

Men and women from throughout the state come to the famed wine-producing region for the seven-month academy program. After they graduate, they're ready to go into the field for 13 weeks of on-the-job training, supervised by three different wardens, before taking on their own assignments.

Many cadets earn a paycheck while attending the academy. Some of these "sponsored" cadets are sent to Napa by DFG after placing high on hiring tests, while others are sponsored by different law enforcement agencies.

And some cadets enroll themselves in the hope of getting a job with DFG. They still must pass background checks and meet other DFG requirements before being hired.

Taking to the field

On top of more than a thousand hours of peace officer training – following the same rigorous coursework as police officers and sheriff's deputies – DFG cadets spend almost 300 hours studying wildlife laws, regulations and activities.

There's a lot to learn: California boasts more habitat and wildlife diversity than any other state. More than 1,000 native fish and wildlife species live here, plus more than 6,300 different native plants. A combined 360 species found in California are listed as threatened or endangered by the state and federal governments.

There's also a lot of ground to cover: The state's 159,000 square miles contain more than 1,100 miles of coastline, 30,000 miles of rivers and streams including 80 major rivers, three deserts and scores of high mountains.

DFG issues about 3 million licenses and permits each year. But more than 34 million people now live in this fast-growing state, and many of them want to experience its natural resources – whether or not they know the rules.

That's why cadets study more than the usual law-enforcement techniques taught at the academy. They also take to the field for training under real-life conditions.

Last June, DFG employees and wardens from around the state converged on the North Bay DFG Field Headquarters to put the cadets through their paces. Located in the Huichica

DFG photos by Matt Elyash

Left and above, mock rescure of an individual.

Creek Wildlife Area in the famed Carneros grape-growing area, the headquarters – an old farm – swarmed with wardens posing as hunters and fishermen.

While tourists sipped fine wines just down the road, the cadets braved an all-day series of "scenarios" — exercises testing the would-be wardens on their knowledge of wildlife regulations and their styles of enforcing them.

Though it was high summer in real time, for the purpose of the scenarios it was high hunting season – Nov. 30, to be exact. Some of the role players acted as law-abiding outdoors enthusiasts breaking no rules; others portrayed less savory characters, flouting Fish and Game regulations and challenging cadets' authority.

Dead ducks tell tales

When Cadet Byron Hernandez, 31, met up with the camouflage-clad duckhunter in the marsh that day, he knew it would be a tough encounter.

Hernandez, a former fiberoptic-installation inspector from Dunsmuir and one of the academy's top cadets, was positive the taciturn hunter had committed several violations of the Fish and Game code.

It wasn't just the man's furtive manner and grumpy demeanor that tipped Hernandez off, but the fact that he was actually veteran DFG Capt. Mike Carion, who runs the DFG Academy.

Carion had donned waders and assumed an ornery persona to test Hernandez and other cadets, one by one, on their knowledge of waterfowl-hunting regulations.

Nearby, a clipboard in her hand, Napa-Solano warden Nicole Bowser watched and listened carefully. Her job was to evaluate Hernandez's performance.

This wasn't just an exercise: It was an exam – and a tough one, Carion said. The cadet with the highest score would qualify for the "Top Duck" award from Ducks Unlimited, to be handed out at graduation.

After a polite greeting, which Carion acknowledged with a grunt, Hernandez began to inspect the "hunter's" gun and game, looking for violations.

"Sorry to be an inconvenience to you," he said as Carion watched sullenly. Hernandez found several violations, including lead shells hidden in a duck decoy (it is unlawful to hunt waterfowl with lead shot)

DFG photo by Debra Hamilton

Cadets learn to use their uniforms to create emergency floatation devices.

DFG photos by Matt Elyash

Cadets must demonstrate physical

In addition to wildlife laws, cadets also learn outdoor skills like compass and map use which they may need when performing their duties.

Though instructors emphasize a polite and congenial approach for making contact, cadets must still learn self-defense and appropriate use of force.

and a motorized decoy, illegal to use before Dec. 1. He also confiscated one of two dead pintail ducks: The limit is one.

"A guy gave it to me," Carion argued. Hernandez wasn't buying it. Hunters can't just casually hand their kills over to other people, he explained. That second pintail should have had a tag indicating who shot it, when and where — it didn't.

Carion's other tricks included concealing two tiny teal carcasses inside a gutted goose. He also managed to convince Hernandez that the out-of-season canvasback in his bag was merely a coot.

All of the dead birds were real, but far from freshly killed. They were seized by DFG wardens as evidence of poaching and kept in freezers until the court cases were concluded, then turned over to the academy.

Not convinced that his wily poacher wasn't concealing more illegal birds, Hernandez carefully examined the rushes at the water's edge, waving off bug swarms so thick he had to spit to keep his mouth clear.

A tern flew overhead with a mocking cry as Hernandez, covered with stickers, emerged from the rushes and began to write out a citation for the violations.

Carion grumbled, but the cadet didn't lose his composure. "I do appreciate your cooperation," Hernandez said calmly.

"Do what you have to," muttered Carion.

Keeping your cool is a must

Hernandez didn't find all of Carion's violations in the scenario. "It's designed to be very difficult," Carion told him - but Hernandez's courteous manner never wavered throughout the nearly hour-long encounter.

Keeping your cool is an essential part of being a game warden, Carion said. Wardens must maintain good public relations as well as enforce the law.

"Ninety percent of our contacts with the public are

strength and agility.

Cadets learn how to operate and control a vehicle at high rates of speed.

nonviolent – unlike other law enforcement agencies," Carion said. "You've got to learn an approach that's very open, congenial and polite – no matter how the public 'contact' might be acting."

Some cadets get angry when they see violations, said Carion. When that happens in the duckhunting scenario, his passively surly manner will "switch like that," he said with a wicked-looking gleam in his eye.

"I'm going to get all over them. It's not a good idea."

In a deliberate strategy to see how cadets handled bad behavior, Warden Steve McDonald took a provocative stance in the pheasant-hunting scenario taking place about a mile away.

The mild-looking, bespectacled warden from San Bernardino County threw himself into the role of an obnoxious hunter with no respect for authority.

Busting McDonald for having shot a hen pheasant was just the beginning of the ordeal for Cadet Mike Lyman, 36. McDonald insisted the dead pheasant was a chicken, crumpled the ticket up and threw it away, complained and stomped around.

Lyman finally told him to sit on the ground and be quiet.

"You should have gotten to that point earlier," said Warden Josh Nicholas of Tuolumne County, who was evaluating Lyman's performance on the scenario. "He was already throwing stuff."

"As soon as you see me start getting wound up, wind me back down," advised McDonald, himself again. "They're going to see how far they can push. As soon as you see it, shut 'em down."

In the field, where law enforcement backup for a warden can be one to four hours away, "Your tongue is your best weapon," McDonald said.

"Your brain, your common sense and what you say is going to be your best ally," added Nicholas. "You don't want to write that incident report saying why you had to use force."

'Everybody has a gun'

Lyman, who comes from Hanford, was a corrections officer before entering the DFG Academy.

"This is a different kind of job," he said with a smile. "Everyone is walking toward you with a shotgun or a rifle."

For most law enforcement officers, such a sight signals a deadly threat. For game wardens, it's just part of the job – unless they meet the rare outdoorsman who truly is dangerous.

"Fish and Game crime, a lot of times, has other associated crimes," Nicholas explained. "Some of these people are wanted for doing stupid things or violating Fish and Game laws."

"We don't know who are the good guys and who are the bad guys," McDonald said.

Added Nicholas: "But we do know everybody has a gun."

"The problem is telling the difference between people who are just out having fun and people who want to kill you," McDonald continued.

Wardens have a high officer assault rate, McDonald and Nicholas said, mostly because there are so few of them: Only about 350 wardens patrol the state, compared to some 12,000 California Highway Patrol officers.

Wardens also earn less than their counterparts in other law-enforcement fields. Cadets can start as low as $32,000 a year, while the highest-paid wardens earn a little more than $50,000.

That may help explain why, according to Carion, the DFG has more openings than cadet wardens to fill them.

But Lyman, the former corrections officer, was eager to start his new life as a game warden.

"I can't wait to get out here and do this full time," he said.

Louisa Hufstader is a staff reporter for the Napa Valley Register, where a shorter version of this story originally appeared.